

NEWS RELEASE

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For Immediate Release:

FIRST FLIGHT OF A WILD CONDOR CHICK IN CALIFORNIA

A wild born condor chick has taken flight; the first wild chick to fly in California in twenty-two years. The chick slowly began the process of fledging (first flight) by leaving the nest in early September and perching 20-50 feet below the nest cave where it hatched April 9, near the Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge in Ventura County. Only very short hopping flights were observed until mid-October, at which time it flew 30 feet. Two weeks later a longer flight of 150 feet was observed, leaving no doubt that the chick had officially fledged. The last wild condor chick to fledge in the wild was in 1982.

The parents are captive released birds from two different release sites, the ten year old male is the dominant male of the southern California flock, and he had two previous nesting attempts that failed. He was released by the US Fish and Wildlife Service's Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge in Ventura County in 1995. The seven year-old female was released in central California at Big Sur by the Ventana Wilderness Society in 1998, she is one of two Big Sur females that relocated to southern California about three years ago; this is her first nesting attempt. The parents will care for the chick until it is approximately 18 months old.

"This wild condor chick taking its first flight is a big step to getting back to a truly wild population. The condors we have released to the wild are now actively reproducing and we hope to see more wild chicks fledge in the future." stated Steve Thompson, Manager of the US Fish and Wildlife Service's California-Nevada Operations Office.

"The California Condor Recovery Program is increasingly successful with each passing year." Ventana Wilderness Society Executive Director Kelly Sorenson confirmed, "This milestone paves the way toward our ultimate goal of fully recovering this species to the wild." Ventana Wilderness Society has been releasing condors in Monterey County's Big Sur region since 1997.

Two other wild chicks were hatched in California this year, one died and the other fell from the nest and broke its wing, the wing is healing and the chick may be released next spring. The first wild chick to survive past fledging was hatched last year in Arizona. That chick at 17 months is still with its parents and doing fine. Two wild condor chicks hatched this year in Arizona are expected to fledge by December.

Background Information

There are 111 condors now living in the wild in California, Arizona and Baja, Mexico and 135 in captivity at the Los Angeles Zoo, San Diego Wild Animal Park, the Oregon Zoo and the Peregrine Fund's World Center for Birds of Prey in Boise, Idaho. The goal of the California Condor Recovery Plan is to establish two

geographically separate populations, one in California and the other in Arizona, each with 150 birds and at least 15 breeding pairs. The largest bird in North America, condors are scavengers that have soared over mountainous areas of California since prehistoric times, but their numbers plummeted in the 20th Century. Condor numbers declined in part due to loss of habitat and food and from shooting, lead poisoning and toxic substances used to poison predators. Condors were listed as an endangered species in 1967, under a law that pre-dated the existing Endangered Species Act. In 1982, the condor population reached its lowest level of 22 birds, prompting biologists to start collecting chicks and eggs for a captive breeding program. By late 1984, only 15 condors remained in the wild. After seven condors died in rapid succession, it was decided to bring the remaining birds in from the wild for the captive breeding program. In 1992, the Recovery Program began releasing California condors back into the wild.

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for coordinating the conservation of the California condor, working with the Los Padres National Forest, California Department of Fish and Game, and several private partners. Private organizations and institutions are not just interested observers, but are active and essential participants in the implementation of the recovery program, contributing personnel, expertise, institutional support, and funding. California condor captive breeding programs are operated at San Diego Wild Animal Park, Los Angeles Zoo, The Peregrine Fund's World Center for Birds of Prey and most recently the Oregon Zoo. Release programs in California are managed by Ventana Wilderness Society, The US Park Service at Pinnacles National Monument and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge; the Arizona release is managed by The Peregrine Fund; and the Baja release site by the Zoological Society of San Diego.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses 544 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

Ventana Wilderness Society has been saving native California wildlife through research, restoration and education for more than twenty-five years. In 1997, their expertise in wildlife restoration allowed VWS to become the first private, non-profit organization to be responsible for releasing and monitoring California condors in the wild. In addition to their work with condors, VWS has been involved with the restoration of prairie falcons, peregrine falcons and bald eagles to the Big Sur and Central Coast Region. VWS also monitors songbird populations and carries out a number of research contracts through the Big Sur Ornithology Lab, including identifying bird responses to habitat restoration and tracking monarch butterfly population fluctuations and migration patterns. Ventana Wilderness Society also provides innovative and exciting environmental education and internship opportunities to youth and young adults throughout the Central Coast Region.

*For more information about the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
and condors, visit our home page at <http://hoppermountain.fws.gov>
For Ventana Wilderness Society visit <http://www.ventanas.org>*